

# **SYRIA: Over 1.5 million refugees return home, according to Russian UN Envoy – Fake news or hidden news?**

– By Willy Fautré –

– HRWF (25.08.2018) – European media repeatedly point at the decrease of refugees from Syria as if it were the work of the EU and the heads of EU member states but is it? Russia and Turkey also claim in their media that this decline is the result of their policies.

On 23 August, Russian Permanent Representative to the United Nations Vasily Nebenzya announced that “more than 1.5 million Syrian refugees have returned to their homes as 96% of Syria’s territory has been liberated from terrorists thanks to the efforts of the Syrian army backed by the Russian taskforce.”

“More than 1,400 populated localities in Syria have been liberated from terrorists and more than 96% of its territory has come under control of government troops and militias thanks to the support from the Russian armed forces,” he said at a United Nations Security Council meeting on threats to international peace and stability coming from terrorism.

“As a result, more than 1.5 million Syrian refugees have been able to return to their homeland,” he stressed.

Last week, Russian President’s Special Envoy for Syria Alexander Lavrentyev and Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Vershinin visited Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey to discuss the problem of Syrian refugees. After the visit, Lavrentyev told TASS that the Russian side had invited Turkey to organize regular work to promote the process of the return of Syrian

refugees to the places of their permanent residence. It was announced that Moscow and Ankara are interested in cooperating in creating conditions for the safe return of Syrian nationals to their home country.

Fake news?

Of course, it would be politically uncomfortable to credit Moscow and Ankara with the sharp decline in the EU of the number of migrants from Syria and to recognize the pragmatic results of Putin's policy in the Astana process in which the West had no say.

If it is not true, Juncker and Western heads of state should denounce such a fake news but they still do not. The ball is now in the court of Brussels.

### ***Towards a new constitution in Syria backed by Moscow***

About the discussions between Moscow and Ankara, Sergey Lavrov, Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs, was quoted as saying by TASS: "We focused on the situation in Syria, including the implementation of agreements reached at the Astana-format summits, high-level and expert meetings, as well as the execution of decisions made at the Syrian National Dialogue Congress, which relate to the formation of a constitutional committee."

Participants in the Syrian National Dialogue Congress, held in the Russian Black Sea resort of Sochi on January 30, decided to establish a constitutional committee that will work on the country's new constitution. The full candidate list will comprise 150 people, including 100 representatives of the Syrian government and domestic opposition, as well as 50 members of the foreign-based opposition. The UN envoy suggested that the committee should consist of no more than 50 members.

### ***Humanitarian aid from Russia***

A public-opinion poll conducted in Russia in late 2017 revealed that 73 percent of the country's citizens consider it necessary to continue helping Syria after the end of the current conflict. An even larger proportion of respondents – 75 percent – said that they would like to see Russia continue sending humanitarian aid to Syria.

A few days ago, Central Muslim Spiritual Board chairman and Russian Chief Mufti Talgat Tajuddin called on the international community to provide humanitarian aid to Syria.

“We are calling on all peoples and countries of the world, primarily Arab and Muslim countries, to extend humanitarian aid to the people of Syria who have suffered from the atrocities of international terrorism and also refugees who are returning to their home country,” he said during a sermon on the occasion of Eid al-Adha, the Muslim holiday, also known as the “Festival of Sacrifice”, at the Lala Tulpan (Tulip in Bloom) mosque in Ufa on 21 August.

The Muslim community takes pride in the fact that “our country has been providing genuine assistance to the fraternal people of Syria in order to repel the aggression of terrorism and restore peaceful life on this land,” he said.

The Russian chief mufti also criticized those who apply double standards and “try to take advantage of any occasion to pit peoples and states against each other, those who, while welcoming the fight against terrorism, are using it only in their own interests.” (Interfax-religion.com, 21 August 2018)

### ***Putin the Savior of Christians in Syria?***

Putin wants to appear as the Savior of Christians in Syria while the EU and most EU member states are reluctant to side with the local historical Christian minorities. In an article entitled “Moscow Patriarchate promotes the Kremlin's interests and its own in the Middle East”, published in Eurasia Daily Monitor on 12 December 2017 (<http://bit.ly/2nUW74J>), Paul

Goble writes:

“The Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate is intensifying its efforts to promote the Kremlin’s interests and its own in the Middle East. Although the Church, either directly or as a cover for Soviet and Russian security agencies, has long been active in that region—the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society is the only Russian post there that lasted from Imperial times through Soviet ones to the present (<http://bit.ly/2CbKHYM> Mospat.ru, October 11; <http://bit.ly/2CemnKD> Portal-credo.ru, December 9) the Moscow Patriarchate is now expanding its efforts. These activities help Vladimir Putin in his drive to expand Russian influence in the Middle East, given the waning of US power there (see <http://bit.ly/2nX4Q6h> Jamestown.org, October 5). At the same time, they ensure that Orthodox Churches in the region will continue to back the Moscow Patriarchate against the Universal Patriarchate in Constantinople on issues like autocephaly for Ukraine and the Moscow Patriarchate’s claim of “canonical territory” over the entire former Soviet space.

The Kremlin is currently convinced it can fill the niche that Washington had in the Middle East for three reasons: First, as Putin’s recent visit to the region shows (<http://bit.ly/2AkuIuz> Kremlin.ru, December 11), the perception of victory of Russian forces over the Islamic State in Syria as well as Moscow’s successful backing of President Bashar al-Assad are popular. Second, the Russian president has presented himself as the chief defender of Christians in the region, something popular even among Donald Trump’s base in the United States; it is, thus, yet another means of projecting influence at Washington’s expense. And third, the Kremlin has positioned itself against Trump’s declaration that Jerusalem is the capital of Israel, a widely unpopular view in the region (<http://bit.ly/2j0FS0k> Yerkramas.org, December 12).

In support of those policies, Moscow Patriarch Kirill organized a meeting last week (December 4) between Putin and

eleven patriarchs and two heads of delegations of Orthodox Churches who were in the Russian capital for a major conclave of the Russian Orthodox Church. Most of the churchmen attending were the leaders of the historical Orthodox patriarchates in the Middle East, and all appeared more than willing to lend their support to the idea that cooperation at the Church-to-Church level would boost the policies Putin and Kirill now back (<http://bit.ly/2BhEUbg> Russkaya Liniya, December 5).

A major reason behind their agreement on this point is that the Russian president promised to offer his support to all the Orthodox Churches in the entire world, including, as the Russkaya Liniya religious affairs portal noted, "in the Middle East in particular." That was music to the ears of many if not all in attendance, who are under pressure not only from the predominantly Muslim populations in which they function but also from the Universal Patriarchate in Constantinople. The latter has pretensions, as the senior Orthodox body, to becoming a kind of eastern papacy that can give orders to the others, including making decisions-as it has already-on the autocephaly of groups within their canonical areas that want independence from the existing patriarchates (<http://bit.ly/2CbJ8yD> Russkaya Liniya, December 5)."

### ***Conclusion***

The West's policy to first oust Bashar al-Assad before rebuilding Syria politically has led to an unending war in the country, massive migration waves to Europe, an increase in terrorist attempts in EU countries, the rise in power of extreme-right parties and the dangerous banalization of anti-Muslim attitudes.

Putin has become the kingmaker in the region and wants to appear as the protector of Muslims against radical Islamism and the savior of Christian minorities.

Is it what the EU wanted?

---

## **A too-narrow vision of religious freedom**

– The Trump administration embraces a laudable desire to expand religious tolerance, but its own intolerance toward some undermines the message. –

By The Editorial Board –

New York Times (16.08.2018) – <https://nyti.ms/2Pnlu8Y> – Even President Trump's fiercest critics can find something to applaud in the administration's campaign to protect and advance religious freedom around the world.

The State Department's inaugural conference on the subject drew hundreds of activists and scores of foreign officials to Washington last month and produced a statement of core beliefs and a plan to hold follow-up meetings in the United States and overseas.

Invoking the 70-year-old Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the conference's concluding statement asserted that "every person has the right to hold any faith or belief, or none at all, and enjoys the freedom to change faith" and argued that "defending the freedom of religion or belief is the collective responsibility of the global community." To which we say, amen.

But the initiative's good intentions are in danger of being undermined by the administration's political agenda, which emphasizes the American strain of evangelical Christianity over other beliefs. In addition, the administration is pursuing immigration and foreign aid policies that belie its

stated defense of religious rights.

The conference was ostensibly called to address the rising threat to religious freedom. Some 80 percent of the global population is severely limited in exercising this right, and of the world's 198 countries, 55 countries, or 28 percent, experienced high or very high levels of government restrictions on religion in 2016, according to a recent study from the Pew Research Center.

While the horrific genocides against Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar and against the Yazidis in Iraq have been widely publicized, there are countless other examples of religious-based persecution and discrimination – against Coptic Christians in Egypt, Muslim Uighurs and Tibetan Buddhists in China, Bahais in Iran, and others.

The Trump administration is not the first to speak up for religious liberty. Since 1998, when Congress passed the International Religious Freedom Act, the State Department has issued annual assessments on how countries handle the issue and has used various government tools to defend groups and individuals overseas who are persecuted or discriminated against.

The current administration took its advocacy to a new level with the three-day conference, whose invited participants were more diverse than many expected. Despite his own strict Catholic leanings, Sam Brownback, the ambassador for international religious freedom, said the goal was to protect religious freedom for all, “not to say we favor this faith or that faith.”

Yet, the event, headlined by Vice President Mike Pence, an evangelical Christian, was clearly meant to appeal most to the evangelicals who are among the president's most fervent political supporters, reflecting a selectivity that is antithetical to the very concept of religious freedom.

One major focus was a demand for the release of Andrew Brunson, an American Christian pastor held by Turkey for nearly two years on bogus charges of complicity in the 2016 aborted coup. Under pressure from evangelicals, Mr. Trump earlier this month imposed sanctions on Turkey, shaking its fragile economy, in an effort to secure Mr. Brunson's release. The president has been silent about 19 other detained Americans, including a NASA scientist who is Muslim.

The presence of a Hungarian delegation seemed particularly at odds with conference aims of promoting "equality under the law." Although Hungary's authoritarian prime minister, Viktor Orbán, has turned the Christian-majority country from democracy to nationalism and Islamophobia, he was praised by the evangelical Christian leader Tony Perkins for supporting persecuted Christians around the world.

President Barack Obama made a point of reaching out to the Muslim world, as well as to other faith communities. And like previous presidents, he tended to consider religious rights within the broad spectrum of human and civil rights. Countries that deny religious freedom invariably restrict other freedoms as well.

Many evangelicals, however, are increasingly promoting religious freedom as "our first freedom," as Mr. Pence did in his speech. Their argument is that human rights are becoming politicized and conflated with economic and social goals, such as equal rights for workers, women and gay and transgender people.

There are other reasons to question the administration's motives, starting with the fact that it has been reliably tough on human rights abuses only when they involve adversaries like Iran, North Korea and Cuba. Last year, then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson told aides not to let human rights concerns create "obstacles" in pursuing American interests. In a memo, one of his advisers said that Saudi

Arabia, Egypt and the Philippines, whose repressive leaders are admired by the president, should be given a pass on rights questions.

Then there are Mr. Trump's disgraceful attempts to ban Muslims from some countries from entering the United States; his reprehensible treatment of refugees and immigrants, especially in separating children from their parents; and his continued support for the Saudi-led war in Yemen, which has caused a humanitarian catastrophe.

Such behavior hardly reflects the "tolerance" and appreciation of "human dignity" that conference documents endorsed.

Supporting people facing religious persecution overseas is both a moral burden of the United States and an exercise in self-interest. As Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said, religious freedom is "an essential building block for all free societies." But it is not the only one.

If the Trump administration aspires to truly advance religious freedom, it will need to embrace a far broader vision of human rights.

Follow The New York Times Opinion section on Facebook and Twitter (@NYT0pinion), and sign up for the Opinion Today newsletter.

A version of this article appears in print on Aug. 18, 2018, on Page SR10 of the New York edition with the headline: A Too-Narrow Vision of Religious Freedom.

The editorial board represents the opinions of the board, its editor and the publisher. It is separate from the newsroom and the Op-Ed section.

---

# CHINA: Underground Catholic priests removed

Authorities send two priests packing in Gansu province for holding a summer camp for youngsters.

Tianshui Diocese's open church holds a summer camp for young people in 2017. Two underground priests of Maijiqu Ganquan Catholic Church have been removed after being accused of holding a summer camp. (Photo by Faith Weekly)

UCA News (09.08.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2MiCy00> – Two underground parish priests in China's Gansu province have been removed after being accused of holding a summer camp for a youth group at their church.

Father Wang Yiqin of Hui county and Father Li Shidong of Leling city of Shandong province were serving Maijiqu Ganquan Catholic Church in Tianshui Diocese.

Tianshui Municipal Ethnic and Religious Affairs Committee has sent a letter asking the local branch of the state-controlled Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association to send personnel to replace the priests, who were accused of holding a summer camp for Bosco Youth Group at the church and sent back to their hometowns.

On July 21, the committee issued a letter stating that no association personnel were involved with the church, which had become a base for underground clergy.

It asked the association to appoint personnel "to strengthen the management of religious affairs in accordance with the law and according to the regulations on religious affairs."

Father Zhao Jianzhang of Tianshui's open church is deputy director and secretary-general of the Gansu Catholic Patriotic

Association and Catholic Administration Commission.

He told ucanews.com that he had been informed of the incident and the parish office had received a letter but he was out of town and would handle the incident when he returned.

“There are people in the government who want to break the current situation. They do not allow the underground church to exist and must convert it to be open because only Tianshui in northwest China still has an underground community,” a source said.

Maijiqu Ganquan Catholic Church is one of only two underground churches in Tianshui Diocese.

Built in 1921, the church grounds cover 7,000 square meters containing a church, complex buildings and houses. The church has been approved by Yuanbeidao district government.

---

## **CHINA: More destroyed mosques in Xingiang**

*Seven out of eight mosques in one of the areas of Lianmuqin town in Xinjiang have been demolished; the remaining one is strictly supervised.*

Bitter Winter (09.08.2018) –  
<https://bitterwinter.org/more-destroyed-mosques-in-xinjiang/> –  
According to a local source, seven of the eight mosques in the Shanshan county’s 11th Brigade of Lianmuqin town, have already been destroyed. The local Muslims are allowed to attend the remaining mosque, but there are more than twice as many government officers as worshipers inside it during prayers.

The local authorities keep some guards in between the prayers as well. “Every time there are 13 Uyghurs practicing namāz, 37 government personnel are on duty,” a local Uyghur Muslim said. “We need to show our ID or give our fingerprints each time we enter the mosque for the five daily namāz prayers. Every time we kneel down and pray to Allah, the government officials stand beside us and stare directly at us. When they’re looking right at you, it’s impossible to feel calm. I finally stopped going.”

Reported by Li Benbo

---

## **Chinese Asylum Seekers: An Urgent Appeal to Chancellor Angela Merkel**

Dear Chancellor Merkel:

We are NGOs active in the field of religious liberty, and write about the urgent situation of a Chinese refugee, Ms. Zhao, currently detained at the Aufsichtsun-  
Dienstleistungs- und Ausreisepflichtige in Hamburg, after she resisted forcible deportation to China on July 9.

We urge you to consider that, should Ms. Zhao be returned to China, she would certainly be arrested and might be subject to torture or “disappear” while in custody.

Ms. Zhao is a member of The Church of Almighty God (CAG), also known as Eastern Lightning, a Chinese Christian new religious movement founded in 1991, whose core teaching is that Jesus

has returned on earth incarnated as Almighty God, a Chinese woman currently leading and guiding the Church in the U.S.

CAG teaches that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which has consistently persecuted Christians, is a manifestation of the evil Great Red Dragon of the Book of Revelation, and that the Dragon will fall under the weight of its errors. CAG does not advocate any revolution and is a non-violent religious movement. Virtually all Western academic scholars who have studied the CAG have debunked the accusation of crimes it has allegedly committed as fake news spread by the Chinese regime.

Because of both its beliefs and its phenomenal expansion (in 2014, CCP sources credited it with four million members), CAG has been persecuted since the 1990s and included since 1995 in the official list of xie jiao.

Xie jiao (normally translated as “evil cults,” but in fact meaning “heterodox teachings”) are movements the government does not approve of. Being active in a xie jiao is a crime punished by Article 300 of the Chinese Criminal Code with a jail penalty of 3 to 7 years or “more.”

CAG claims that more than 300,000 of its members have been arrested, more than 40,000 tortured, thousands held in the dreaded “transformation through education” camps, and more than 30 died in jail in highly suspicious circumstances. Bodies returned to the families in several cases had organs missing, evidence that the infamous “organ harvesting” practice has been extended to CAG prisoners. Scholars cannot confirm precise figures, but regard them as believable, as Chinese media and documents report weekly that hundreds of CAG members have been arrested.

A confidential CCP document leaked to Western media indicates that a new massive campaign for “eradicating” CAG has been launched in 2018, thousands of members have been arrested and the number of arrests is still increasing.

Those who have sought asylum abroad are regarded as particularly dangerous members of the CAG and as disloyal citizens, and are prime candidates for harsher jail penalties, with a serious risk of torture and extra-judicial killing.

We urge Germany to honor its well-known tradition of protecting human rights and religious liberty and not to return Ms. Zhao, and other CAG members in similar conditions, to her persecutors, granting them the asylum they deserve.

August 1, 2018

CAP-LC Coordination des associations et des particuliers pour la liberté de conscience

CESNUR – Center for Studies on New Religions

EIFRF European Inter-Religious Forum for Religious Freedom

FOB – European Federation for Freedom of Belief

FOREF – Forum for Religious Freedom Europe

HRWF – Human Rights Without Frontiers

LIREC – Center for Studies on Freedom of Belief, Religion and Conscience

ORLIR – International Observatory of Religious Freedom of Refugees

Soteria International

---

**Ukraine: 1030th anniversary  
of Christianization of Kievan  
Rus celebration by UOC/ Kyiv**

# Patriarchate

HRWF (29.07.2018) – On 28 July, the UOC/ KP celebrated the anniversary of the Christianization of Ukraine which took place with the conversion of Prince Vladimir in 988. President Poroshenko participated in the ceremony with his wife. On the previous day, the UOC/MP had celebrated the same historical event under the name of “Baptism of Rus” in Kyiv and so had the Russian Orthodox Church in Moscow.

## ***Up to 150,000 take part in UOC – KP procession in Kyiv***

Interfax Ukraine (28.07.2018) – From 65,000 to 150,000 believers have participated in a religious procession of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP) dedicated to the 1030th anniversary of the Christianization of Kyivan Rus-Ukraine.

“About 65,000 people participated in the march as of 13.00. The situation is calm and controlled,” First Deputy Interior Minister Serhiy Yarovy said the Interior Ministry’s page on Facebook on Saturday.

According to him, bomb disposal experts and dog handlers checked the route along which the column of pilgrims moved in order to prevent terror attacks and provocations.

The safety of citizens was ensured by the police, the National Guard and the State Emergency Service.

The head of the information department of the UOC-KP, Archbishop Yevstratiy (Zoria), said that up to 150,000 parishioners had taken part in the events.

“‘The biggest religious procession in Ukraine’s history’ – this is what Patriarch Filaret said in his speech after a prayer service on Saint Volodymyr Hill. According to various estimates, from 65,000 to 150,000 believers or more gathered in the center of Kyiv for a prayer service,” Yevstratiy

(Zoria) wrote on his Facebook page after the religious procession.

He noted that prior to this day “only the Maidan during the Revolution of Dignity brought together so many patriotic citizens who pray for the victory of truth and peace in Ukraine.”

***Ukrinform: About 65,000 people participate in religious procession in Kyiv***

Ukrinform (28.07.2018) – As of 13.00, about 65,000 people took part in a religious procession of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP).

The procession was guarded by 2,500 law enforcers, the press service of the Internal Ministry of Ukraine reported.

“As of 13:00, about 65,000 people participated in the religious procession. The situation was calm and controlled,” the deputy director of the Department of Communications of the Interior Ministry of Ukraine wrote on Facebook with reference to First Deputy Interior Minister Serhiy Yarovy.

The law enforcers continue to protect public order during the event.

As reported, on July 28, the ceremonial events on the occasion of the 1030th anniversary of the conversion of the Kyivan Rus-Ukraine to Christianity were held in Kyiv with the participation of Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko.

***President Poroshenko and his wife took part in the Cross Procession on the occasion of the 1030th anniversary of Christianization of Ukraine-Rus***

RISU (28.07.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2vfaQaV> President Petro Poroshenko and his wife Maryna Poroshenko took part in the Cross Procession on the occasion of the 1030th anniversary of Christianization of Ukraine-Rus’.

Believers of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyivan Patriarchate, headed by Patriarch Filaret, and believers of the UAOC, headed by Metropolitan Macarius, passed to the garden square near the monument to St. Vladimir.

The Head of State together with his wife also took part in the prayer service for Ukraine and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church.

The festive event was attended by representatives of the Government, members of the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches, well-known public figures, volunteers, representatives of culture, science and education.